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THE MASSORAH AND THE MASSORETIC TEXT.

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Gift of Prof. J. H. Thayer.

The Massorah and the Massoretic Text.

IMPORTANT as is the question of faithful translations, still more important must be the accuracy of the Text which is to be translated.

Hence, while the Trinitarian Bible Society has protested against many corrupt *versions*, it has protested still more against taking the Papal Vulgate of Clement VIII. as a *text* from which translations are to be made, inasmuch as it puts an unpardonable slight on the Hebrew and Greek originals.

It was Cardinal Ximenes who in his Polyglot printed the Vulgate between the Hebrew and the Greek, saying that he had put it there "like Jesus between the two thieves" !

All, therefore, who take that Vulgate translation as a text, perpetrate the insult thus offered to the Originals.

The object of the Trinitarian Bible Society being "the circulation of uncorrupted versions of the Word of God," an important part of its duty is to provide a pure Text from which all such translations may be made.

The Committee have, therefore,

entered into arrangements for publishing such a text of the Hebrew Old Testament, and it will (D.V.) be issued in the course of four or five years.

To enable the members of the Society and the general public to understand the importance and necessity of such a work, it is necessary to begin at the beginning, and set forth the leading facts of the case.

The Massorah, and the Massoretic Text, though closely related, are at the same time perfectly distinct. The phrase, "the Massoretic Text," is one very commonly used of the present printed text of the Hebrew Old Testament, but, as Mr. Aldis Wright * truly observes, "it is not too much to say that at present no one knows what the Massoretic Text is." The text popularly so called can be allowed the title only by courtesy; and most of the existing printed texts are not only without authority but are also full of blunders of all kinds, while many of the alterna-

* *The Times*, Dec. 27th, 1883.

tive readings are little more than arbitrary editorial notes.

Our duty will be best performed by answering two questions—I. What is the Massorah? II. What is its relation to the Massoretic Text?

The sources of information have only of late years been available; hence the paucity of information on the subject which is to be found in ordinary works of reference.

In answering the first question, we must first note the *word*. It occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible (viz., Numbers xxxi. 5 and 16). It means, according to Kimchi, *a gift made with the whole heart and put into the hand of another;** to give or entrust something into the hands of another person, that he may retain it in his possession as if it were his own.

The Hebrew language was originally written without vowels or vowel points; and it can be easily understood that a word of two or three consonants might be pronounced in several different ways—e.g., b t might be *bat*, *bit*, *boat*, or *but*; p r s h might be *parish* or *perish*.† In many cases, of course, the correct sense would be evident from the context; while it is easily conceivable

that there might be cases in which great uncertainty would exist.

Now, with the Hebrew this uncertainty was guarded against from the beginning by the constant reading aloud of the Scriptures, by which the correct pronunciation would be *delivered over to* and *handed down* from generation to generation. This is what is referred to, doubtless, in Neh. viii. 8—“And they read in the book the Law of God [= the original text] distinctly [= the Chaldee paraphrase, translating it into Aramaic. So R. V. margin, “with an interpretation”], and gave the sense [= the division, according to the sense, i.e., of the sentences and verses], and caused them to understand the reading [= the traditional pronunciation of the words, i.e., the Massorah].”

Among the Jews there was a special order of men whose duty it was thus to care for and study and transcribe the Word of God.* They are called by various names in the Bible, all of them setting forth the nature and duties of their office.

While the Jews continued in the

* Numbers xxxi. 5, “delivered” = *given over to the special work*. And verse 16, “commit” = *gave themselves over to trespass, etc.*

† Thus, שְׁלֹמֹה may mean, in English, *wherefore*, *retribution*, *Solomon*, *garment*, or *perfect*, according to the vowels supplied.

* Their name סופר means (1) *to write*, (2) *to set in order*, (3) *to count*. All these meanings are included in the work of the Scribe. The Great Synagogue was founded by Nehemiah (x. 1–10), and lasted till 300 B.C. It consisted of 120 members, representing the five classes of the Jewish nation, divided into זקנים, πρεσβύτεροι, elders, and סופרים, γραμματεῖς, scribes.

Covenant of their God, and were in possession of all their privileges, there was thus every security for the preservation of the Word of God, but in later times — when, is not precisely known, but probably about 300 B.C.—the Scribes elaborated a complete system of marks and signs to indicate the correct vowel sounds,* and also to serve the purpose of locking every word and every letter into its place, so that it might be possible at any future time to know if any alterations had been made in the original Text.

They thus took means whereby that Text might be *handed down* correctly—hence their name *Massorites*, and the name of their work *Massorah*. This *Massorah* was inscribed on the margins of the manuscripts. Here was recorded the results of all their *countings* by which the text could be checked. Here was set down the number of letters, words, etc., of every book;† also the number of times each letter occurs in the whole

twenty-four books.* But this work was not confined to letters, etc., or to mere numbers. Important words, peculiar forms and expressions, were noted as occurring so many times.† The object was, by a system of cross-references, to lock every letter and word into its place, so that the Sacred Text could be reproduced in absolute purity by any Scribe if he gave good heed to the directions of the *Massorah*. Thus, the *Massorah* became what the Rabbis called it—"a fence to the Scriptures."

As it grew, it was not confined to the margins merely, but separate treatises were written and publicly taught. The Scribes, who copied the sacred manuscripts for an individual or a community, selected from these treatises and margins what they pleased or as much as was value for the payment received, and wrote it in the margins above

pendent letters, anomalous forms and phrases. In fact, it extended to every phenomenon of the Sacred Text.

* Thus, א occurs 42,377 times ; ב, 35,218 times ; ג, 29,837 times, etc.

† Some 80,000 expressions or forms of expression occur only *once* in the Hebrew Bible. It is also noted, for example, that בראשית, "In the beginning," occurs three times at the beginning of a verse, Gen. i. 1, Jer. xvi. 1, xxviii. 1; and that ידבר, "and He separated," occurs three times, Gen. i. 4, 7, and 1 Chron. xxv. 1. If, therefore, any particular MS. has this expression more or less times than "*three*," the error may be at once easily detected and corrected. And the same in a vast number of similar cases.

* Thus it was authoritatively transmitted that שבועים, Lev. xii. 5, is to be pronounced, שִׁבְעִים, "*two weeks*," and not שְׁבַעִים "*seventy days*." Also that ברחל, Ex. xxiii. 19, is to be pronounced, and therefore read, בְּחֵלֶב, "*in the milk*," and not בְּחֵלֶב, "*in the fat*," etc., etc.

† Hence we learn that the ך in בורן, Lev. xi. 42, is the 'middle letter of the Pentateuch; "Moses diligently sought," Lev. x. 16, the middle words. Also that ך in ויער, Ps. lxxx. 14, is the middle letter of the Psalms. It also registers the majuscular and minuscular, inverted or sus-

and below the text. Hence, to-day, no one Hebrew MS. of the Scriptures contains the whole of the Massorah, and no Hebrew scholar has ever attempted to produce a complete edition.

Learned Hebraists in the Middle Ages, whose fame was spread over Italy and Germany, and who were the great teachers of Hebrew to the greatest men in Europe, devoted much attention to the subject, and two of them (Jacob ben Chayim, 1470—1538, who rescued the Massorah from perdition, and for the first time committed a great part of it to printing, and Elias Levita, 1468—1549) did much to make the labour lighter for those who should in after years work in that important field. Since their day no scholar except Dr. Ginsburg has ever seriously set himself to reproduce a complete Massorah.

It is obvious that, in order to obtain the whole of it, it is absolutely necessary to examine every accessible manuscript, each of which contains some portion of it. Each must, therefore, be made to yield up its contribution.

Hundreds of MSS. have in this way been examined by Dr. Ginsburg in and out of Europe, and their margins copied, classified, tabulated, and printed. The fourth large folio volume is in the press. These volumes, together with several large volumes in manuscript, may therefore be said to contain the complete Massorah, as far as it can

be ascertained, and some idea may be formed of the labour involved when it is stated that it was necessary to construct *five* separate concordances of as many different phenomena.*

The Massorah, therefore, is vital to the construction of the correct text of the Hebrew Old Testament. Of manuscripts there are none older than Cent. IX., but the Massorah carries us back at least one thousand years further!

The work now about to be accomplished is to collate our present printed text of the Old Testament with this Massorah, and make every correction that is required. Until this is done, we cannot be said to possess an authentic Hebrew Text. It does not at all follow that the changes will be many, or of equally material significance. Some, though of slight importance, will exhibit the impurity and imperfection of the present so-called Massoretic Text. There are others, of course, where the corrections will be more weighty, and where great light will be thrown on what has been hitherto obscure.

Even at this stage of the work

* (1) A concordance of proper names, filling 450 folio pages. (2) A concordance of Hebrew particles, consisting of two folio volumes, each of 500 pages. (3) A concordance of Hebrew particles, with the subsequent words in alphabetical order (250 pages). (4) An alphabetical list of words which occur only once in a particular form. (5) A list of unique words arranged alphabetically.

we are able to see the force of our Lord's words, "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt. v. 18). "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass than one tittle of the law to fail" (Luke xvi. 17).

The "*jot*," or *yod*, is, of course, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet (י). But what is the "tittle"? It has been popularly (but it appears erroneously) explained as the little point which distinguishes certain letters from others (*e.g.*, from י, כ from כּ, etc.), but the Massorah leaves us in no doubt what this "tittle" is. It is something far more insignificant both in size and purpose, viz., a small ornament which is attached by immemorial tradition to certain letters of the Hebrew alphabet in canonical Jewish caligraphy. One of the Massoretic treatises explains its use, and gives stringent rules for its application.

It is only through the study of the Massorah that this promise of Christ's can be fulfilled, and the implied injunction obeyed.

We cannot do better than give here a brief extract from *The Times'* Review of Dr. Ginsburg's third volume. It occupied a page of that journal (Dec. 27th, 1883), and these are amongst its concluding words:—

"It is, of course, impossible in a notice like the present to give anything like an adequate account of results whose value and importance can only be appreciated by advanced He-

brew scholars. It must suffice to say here that the publication of the Massorah in the complete, accurate, and scholarly form given to it by Dr. Ginsburg really amounts to an entirely new departure in the domain of Hebrew scholarship and scientific Biblical criticism. Divines of all schools are in the habit of paying the utmost respect to the Massoretic Text. The real Massoretic Text is only to be found in the pages of Dr. Ginsburg's work; that which now goes by the name is by comparison incomplete, imperfect, incorrect, and corrupt.

Whatever authority, therefore, is imputed to the received Massoretic Text must in time be transferred to the Text as it results from Dr. Ginsburg's inquiries. For the present such results are only accessible to Hebrew scholars."

But, with the contemplated publication of these results by the Trinitarian Bible Society, they will ere long be accessible to all the world.

The bearing of this work on the Revised Version, and, indeed, on all future translations, may be seen by the following extract from the first of the Dean of Canterbury's papers on the Revised Version, which appeared in *The Quiver* for June, 1885:—

"So little has been done for the criticism of the Old Testament that this Massorah has been made fully known to scholars only after the revision of the Authorized

Version had been ten years in progress. One of the company, Dr. C. D. Ginsburg, has now published in three folio volumes this vast mass of critical materials; but, until some equally laborious student collates the Hebrew Text of our Bible with the Massorah, we cannot be said accurately to know even what is the Massoretic Text.

"Our hopes still turn to him as the scholar best able to make these treasures really available for our use."

With gratitude and pleasure the Committee inform the members of the Trinitarian Bible Society that

Dr. Ginsburg himself will be the "laborious student" referred to, and, believing that the same Divine providence which has put the work into their hands will enable them to carry it out, they hope to have the honour of printing and publishing the new Text, and thereby increase the usefulness and prosperity of the Society.

Further particulars will be published in due course, and meantime we commend the general and this special work of the Society to all who value its leading principle—viz., "The Circulation of Uncorrupted Versions of the Word of God."

N.B.—As the proposed work will necessarily involve a large expenditure (probably not less than £2000 for the first edition), the Committee will have to make special preparation. If any friends feel interested in the publication of the New Text, the Committee will thankfully receive and appropriate their contributions for that purpose. All remittances should be sent to the Secretary at the office of the Society, 96, Newgate Street, London, E.C.

